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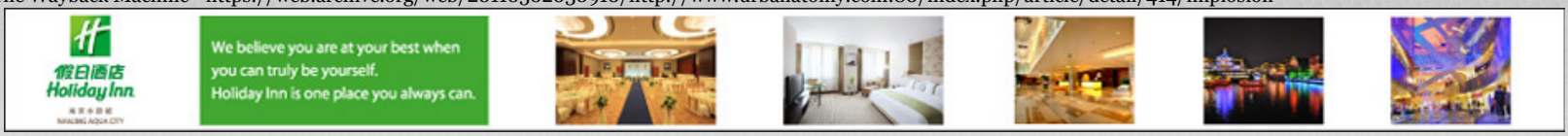

Implosion

by nickland @ Friday, 29 April 2011 16:23

We could be on the brink of a catastrophic implosion – but that's OK

Science fiction has tended to extroversion. In America especially, where it found a natural home among an unusually future-oriented people, the iconic SF object was indisputably the space ship, departing the confines of Earth for untrammeled frontiers. The future was measured by the weakening of the terrestrial gravity well.

Cyberpunk, arriving in the mid-1980s, delivered a cultural shock. William Gibson's *Neuromancer* still included some (Earth-orbital) space activity – and even a communication from Alpha Centauri -- but its voyages now curved into the inner space of computer systems, projected through the starless tracts of Cyberspace. Interstellar communication bypassed biological species, and took place between planetary artificial intelligences. The United States of America seemed to have disappeared.

Space and time had collapsed, into the 'cyberspace matrix' and the near-future. Even the abstract distances of social utopianism had been incinerated in the processing cores of micro-electronics. Judged by the criteria of mainstream science fiction, everything cyberpunk touched upon was gratingly close, and still closing in. The future had become imminent, and skin-tight.

Gibson's cities had not kept up with his wider – or narrower – vision. The urban spaces of his East Coast North America were still described as 'The Sprawl', as if stranded in a rapidly-obsolescing state of extension. The crushing forces of technological compression had leapt beyond social geography, sucking all historical animation from the decaying husks of 'meat space'. Buildings were relics, bypassed by the leading edge of change.

(Gibson's Asian city-references are, however, far more intense, inspired by such innovations in urban compression as the Kowloon Walled City, and Japanese 'coffin hotels'. In addition, Urbanists disappointed by first-wave cyberpunk have every reason to continue on into *Spook Country*, where the influence of GPS-technology on the re-animation of urban space nourishes highly fertile speculations.)

Star cruisers and alien civilizations belong to the same science fiction constellation, brought together by the assumption of expansionism. Just as, in the realm of fiction, this 'space opera' future collapsed into cyberpunk, in (more or less) mainstream science –

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represented by SETI programs – it perished in the desert of the Fermi Paradox. (OK, it's true, Urba
nerdish obsession with this topic.)

John M. Smart's solution to the Fermi Paradox is integral to his broader 'Speculations on Cosmic
from compressive development. Advanced intelligences do not expand into space, colonizing vast g
self-replicating robot probes in a program of exploration. Instead, they implode, in a process of '
themselves primarily through the hyper-exponential efficiency gains of extreme miniaturization (t
femto-scale engineering, of subatomic functional components). Such cultures or civilizations, nuc
technological intelligence, emigrate from the extensive universe in the direction of abysmal inten
near-black-hole densities at the edge of physical possibility. Through transcension, they withdraw
communication (whilst, perhaps, leaving 'radio fossils' behind, before these blink-out into the sile

If Smart's speculations capture the basic outlines of a density-attracted developmental system, th
to follow a comparable path, characterized by an escape into inwardness, an interior voyage, invo
Approaching singularity on an accelerating trajectory, each city becomes increasingly inwardly dir
irresistible attraction of its own hyperbolic intensification, whilst the outside world fades to irrele
into cities, on a path of departure from the world. Their destination cannot be described within th
and, indeed, tediously over-familiar – universe. Only in the deep exploratory interior is innovation
takes place at an infernal, time-melting rate.

What might Smart-type urban development suggest?

(a) Devo Predictability. If urban development is neither randomly generated by internal processes
external decisions, but rather guided predominantly by a developmental attractor (defined primar
follows that the future of cities is at least partially autonomous in regards to the national-political
cultural-architectural influences that are often invoked as fundamentally explanatory. Urbanism c
but its principal 'goals' and practical development paths are, in each individual case, internally an
When a city 'works' it is not because it conforms to an external, debatable ideal, but rather becau
cumulative intensification that strongly projects its 'own', singular and intrinsic, urban character.
become itself, but more -- taking itself further and faster. That alone is urban flourishing, and un
unlocks the shape of any city's future.

(b) Metropolitanism. Methodological nationalism has been systematically over-emphasized in the
at the expense of methodological individualism). A variety of influential urban thinkers, from Jane
sought to correct this bias by focusing upon the significance, and partial autonomy, of urban eco
municipal politics to aggregate prosperity, civilization, and golden ages. They have been right to
socio-historical phenomenon.

(c) Cultural Introversion. John Smart argues that an intelligence undergoing advanced relativistic
landscape increasingly uninformative and non-absorbing. The search for cognitive stimulation dra
cultures evolve, through accelerating social complexity, they can be expected to manifest exactly
processes, of runaway intelligence implosion, become ever more gripping, engaging, surprising,
whilst the wider cultural landscape subsides into predictable tedium, of merely ethnographic and
singularity becomes increasingly urban-futural (rather than ethno-historical), to the predictable di
nation states. Like Gibson's Terrestrial Cyberspace, encountering another of its kind in orbit arou
cosmopolitan connectivity is made through inner voyage, rather than expansionary outreach.

(d) Scale Resonance. At the most abstract level, the relation between urbanism and microelectron
coming computers are closer to miniature cities than to artificial brains, dominated by traffic prol
/ communications, zoning issues (mixed use), the engineering potential of new materials, questic
solutions to density constraints), entropy or heat / waste dissipation (recycling / reversible compu
(new viruses). Because cities, like computers, exhibit (accelerating phylogenetic) development wit
they provide a realistic model of improvement for compact information-processing machinery, se
practical solutions to the problem of relentless intensification. Brain-emulation might be consider
computational goal, but it is near-useless as a developmental model. Intelligent microelectronic t
open-ended process of urban problem-solving, but they also recapitulate it at a new level.

(e) Urban Matrix. Does urban development exhibit the real embryogenesis of artificial intelligence
Internet, military Skynet, or lab-based AI program, is it the path of the city, based on accelerating
compression), that best provides the conditions for emergent super-human computation? Perhaps
so is that the problem of the city – density management and accentuation – already commits it to

advance of any deliberately guided research. The city, by its very nature, compresses, or intensifi
When the first AI speaks, it might be in the name of the city that it identifies as its body, althoug
more than a ‘radio fossil’ -- a signal announcing the brink of silence -- as the path of implosion de
the alien interior.

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